

# Harriet Crocker Explains How A Musical Show Is Put Together

By BLANCHE B. WHITE

The presentation of a good musical show has always been one of the most cooperative ventures in the world, yesterday or today. It is the sum-total of the talents and efforts of countless people ranging upwards from the ushers and stage-hands to the stars and directors of the production, whether done on a lavish professional scale or done on a local amateur scale. It is a major catastrophe economically when a professional show folds. It is likewise a tragedy of major proportions when the star of a local show develops laryngitis the day before the show or when a member of the chorus can't find a safety pin in the dressing room on opening night. It is a big headache for both types of shows when only a small audience comes to see their performance.

Publicity personnel are the innocent by-standers in show-business. They are the go-betweens for audience, producers and cast. Their duty is to help make money for the producers, convince the audience that it is money well spent, and imbue the cast with the desire to knock themselves out for other sides.—Right now we are embarking on the convincing side of the job, and we are going to start it by telling you how a local show is born.

Annually for the past six years Duxbury Post No. 223 A.L. have put on a show with a cast made up of local talent, including members and non-members of the Post. Proceeds from the shows have gone some years to specific needy causes, other years toward the upkeep of Legion Hall, which is the club-house for our war veterans. The regular procedure is for the post-members to vote to sponsor a show, and appoint or elect a committee. That committee chooses its own chairman or co-chairmen and they all take it from there.

The first job of the chairman even before show dates have been set, is to get the services of a director. "Now," as the old-time orators used to say, "we have in our midst, a lady who is one of the best show-directors in these parts, none other than our own Harriet Crocker." And brother, don't think the Legion show-chairman doesn't work himself up into a stew wondering whether this is the year Harriet might be going to take a rest, or maybe has another show on the fire. When he finally contacts her and secures her services as director his sigh of relief is like the tailwind of a hurricane.

We did a biography of Harriet Crocker two years ago (Clipper Feb. 11, 1954) but we had neither time nor space enough to delve into the mystery of how she does it. By the way, we mean, how year after year she can put together such thoroughly enjoyable shows for Plymouth, Kingston and Pembroke organizations, for the Duxbury Yacht Club and Legion, and in years past the High School. At our request she has graciously consented to answer a few questions and let us in on her behind-the-directing successful productions.

## Unique Job

Putting on the Legion Minstrels is unique, Harriet says, in that it is both an individual and a cooperative project. In most cases when she is asked to direct, she is told by a committee what theme they have chosen, they say "we want a minstrel or variety show with a Western or a Nautical theme this year," and she does her best. When the Legion show-chairman calls her, he says "we want you to do a show." period.

"Yes," Harriet replied to the first of our bombardment of questions, ideas for show numbers are always flitting through her mind throughout the year, but she never formulates them until she has a specific directing job to do.

And another "Yes"—she does see a lot of musicals, the current hits as they appear in Boston, and also the light operas and musical comedies presented on the stages of the summer theatres. She loves musicals on TV also, but makes a point of watching and listening objectively with a humble admiration for the singing and dancing done by the participants, and for the evident fine direction behind them. She has no desire, and never, never, attempts to imitate or copy any shows she has seen or heard.

To our inquiries as to whether she plans her shows on current trends, we got a definite "No." Trend-of-the-times shows and current music fads can become pretty tiresome when seen and heard constantly. Of course she qualified, in any variety show one is bound to find one or two numbers that just happen to coincide with a trend.

Harriet, we know, tried hard to come up with something to please everyone's taste, which is a tall order. Even in this year's Legion Minstrels of 1956, she is trying to



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please many of the Legionnaires by making part of the show an All-man minstrel, and she hopes to please a large section of the audience and the girl-members of the cast by making the other part of the show an Olio. Harriet liked our definition of an Olio as a potpourri of songs, dances and comedy acts, and thinks it could bear repeating, but would like to enlarge on it by saying that in this case it is going to be sort of a series of little productions within the big one.

We finally got down to brass tacks, to find out the various steps she takes in putting together a show. Does she have a file of shows, does she have a music file, does she do research? She sure does have a file of shows represented by a stack of loose-leaf notebooks piled up in her basement, bearing the dates of shows done all the way back to her father's day. (Her father was the late George Phillips, well-known throughout Plymouth County for his fine directing and performing abilities in musicals.) She also has in the basement, housed in a big two-drawer file (her husband Richard kindly built for her) hundreds of pieces of music that cover years of publishing. Some she has collected herself, some are the generous gift of friends who know of her interest in and love for music. These pieces are arranged alphabetically in her files, and besides this file, on her piano, she has most of the current hit-songs of today which she uses constantly in her work as a pianist. She has never found it necessary to do research except when putting on the 1954 Legion show titled "Half a Century of Song" when she did get wonderful cooperation from the Boston Disc Jockeys and Boston

and New York publishing houses in her quest for the most popular songs of each year from 1900-1950.

### *Digs Into Files*

For this year's show she went through her files and selected 150 pieces of music for consideration. Then the cooperative angle of the project got its chance. She presented her ideas for the show to the Legion committee for approval, met with the cast, held try-outs, and returned to her own work of sifting and selecting music, suitable both for the show and for the girls and men who are to sing and dance to it. She simmered it down to 48 numbers. (Methods of try-outs and rehearsals we will cover for you in another article.)

One of the real low-downs or inside secrets we are most anxious to find out about after watching her rehearsals and shows, is how she works out the chorus action, the dance routines, etc? With a record-player, maybe? "No." Harriet has never had a record-player in the house until this year when her son Phillips was given one. How then? She types every word of the songs she has chosen for the show.

She doesn't need the music for the tune or rhythm to plan her action or choreography—she just knows it. (Her mind is a juke-box of melody and as soon as she sees words or music, the tune drops into place.) She admits that this part of show planning is really tough even though it has its humorous aspects. She spends hours in her bedroom practicing tap-dance routines before her mirror to get the effects she wants to achieve. She spends more hours counting out a tambourine rhythm on her toes, knees, arms and head. She even takes her show into the kitchen where she spreads matches and toothpicks on a table to form her patterns for positioning the cast on the stage for both chorus and specialty numbers. (So if you should stroll by Harriet's Chestnut St. home some evening and see her cavorting in front of her mirror, or hitting herself on the head with a tambourine, don't call for the man in the white coat. Just think of the wonderful musical show you are going to see when the Legion Minstrels of 1956 goes on at RHS